The Qualitative Report

Volume 23 | Number 3 How To Article 1

3-3-2018

Epistemological Ruptures: Flashback on Fieldwork Dilemmas While Doing Research on Friends at Home

Israel Aguilar

Texas A & M University - Corpus Christi, israelaguilar01@hotmail.com

Epistemological Ruptures: Flashback on Fieldwork Dilemmas While Doing Research on Friends at Home

Abstract

While doing fieldwork at home and/or with people who are familiar can yield new knowledge, researchers using ethnographic techniques ought to first assume the role of apprentice and enact vulnerability before they can represent findings that represent what really happened. Doing otherwise can tarnish relationships or jeopardize a study. The history of narrative within ethnographic research is discussed as an introduction to the author's own personal narrative, which is in the form of a flashback that illustrates the journey he embarked on in 2010 when he initiated dissertation research in his hometown of south Texas. It is here where he tells about the epistemological ruptures he encountered that were originally understood as fieldwork dilemmas only. He provides a discussion section where he shares how he make use of the lessons learned from writing a flashback in his current position of professor within a principal preparation program.

Keywords

Epistemology, Leadership, Fieldwork, Dissertation, Friends

The Qualitative Report 2018 Volume 23, Number 3, How To Article 1, 505-518

Epistemological Ruptures: Flashback on Fieldwork Dilemmas While Doing Research on Friends at Home

Israel Aguilar
Texas A & M University, Corpus Christi, Texas, USA

While doing fieldwork at home and/or with people who are familiar can yield new knowledge, researchers using ethnographic techniques ought to first assume the role of apprentice and enact vulnerability before they can represent findings that represent what really happened. Doing otherwise can tarnish relationships or jeopardize a study. The history of narrative within ethnographic research is discussed as an introduction to the author's own personal narrative, which is in the form of a flashback that illustrates the journey he embarked on in 2010 when he initiated dissertation research in his hometown of south Texas. It is here where he tells about the epistemological ruptures he encountered that were originally understood as fieldwork dilemmas only. He provides a discussion section where he shares how he make use of the lessons learned from writing a flashback in his current position of professor within a principal preparation program. Keywords: Epistemology, Leadership, Fieldwork, Dissertation, Friends

Introduction

The field of anthropology largely stems from Western thought and tradition that privileges objectivity and binary logic to understand and interpret the *Other* in foreign contexts. We see examples of this in the early forms of anthropological work that is characterized by the nature of the description given by the social scientist over his or her subjective experience during fieldwork. Yet, even early anthropologist's work, Malinowski's (1967) diary, demonstrates that the ethnographer is not simply a transcriber of life and society, but also a human who has emotions, thoughts, and desires that always already implicates the research and/or the process of data collection. As such, this dynamic between fieldwork and the researcher is conceptualized as the silent space or a gap because of how "texts confined discussion of the personal and the emotional to particular aspects of the research process, rather than establishing them as pervasive to the whole enterprise" (Coffey, 1999, p. 3). This then explains why early anthropologists, who lost their supplies or encountered problems with natives who did not desire to meet with them, documented these issues as ones that impeded fieldwork, not part of the fieldwork in-and-of it-self. Nonetheless, fieldwork is personal, emotional, and identity work (Coffey, 1999). After all, ethnographers are human, too, and their fieldwork is not removed from the internal and external challenges one encounters along the way.

While personal thoughts and the tale of dynamics with participants that make up the internal and external challenges are not usually available unless they are documented as part of the research process while in the field, Malinowski's wife published his diary because she felt there is something to be said about understanding the "inner personality, and his way of living and thinking during the period of his most important work in the field" (Malinowski, 1967, p. ix). As such, the purpose and the role of the social scientist within modern social anthropology morphed and the notion of reflective anthropology became popular. While this is not to be understood as a separate branch, Messerschmidt (1981) maintained that this new direction "mark[ed] an end to the era of colonial anthropology and the beginning of a new maturity of

purpose" (p. 197). Thus, Rosaldo (1989) conceptualized this as a crisis in ethnographic writing that manifested from an ongoing interdisciplinary program that has been transforming social thought since the 1960s.

In 2010, I conducted a dissertation research study, a qualitative bricolage (Kincheloe, 2001) that borrowed ethnographic techniques. Upon my completion, committee members suggested I include an epilogue to account for internal and external dilemmas I experienced during fieldwork when working with a friend who was the sole participant of the study. Yet, after reading the text years after I wrote it, I concluded that I barley articulated what *really* happened when I researched the practice of one teacher who was also my friend. Perhaps I could not capture the continuum of challenges because I originally understood the task of documenting them as an afterthought. Or, maybe I was afraid of saying something my friend would not like. By reflecting back on the past during the time I spent in the field conducting research for my dissertation, I provided myself the opportunity to articulate what *really* happened between the participant and me. In doing so, I better understood the epistemological rupture(s) I experienced along the way that continue to inform the work I do as a professor in a school principal preparation program.

In this article, I argue that while doing fieldwork at home and/or with people who are familiar can yield new knowledge, researchers using ethnographic techniques ought to first assume the role of apprentice and enact vulnerability before they can represent findings that represent what *really* happened. Otherwise, one can tarnish a relationship or jeopardize a study. I begin this next section with a literature review that discusses the history of personal narrative within ethnographic research. I then tell about the methods I used to gather data for my own study. Next, I present a personal narrative in the form of a flashback that illustrates the journey I embarked on in 2010 when I initiated dissertation research in my hometown of south Texas with a high school teacher who was my mentor and best friend. It is here where I tell about the epistemological ruptures I encountered that were originally understood as fieldwork dilemmas only. I then provide a discussion section where I share how I make use of the lessons learned from writing the flashback in my current position of professor within a principal preparation program.

Literature Review

Contemporary anthropologists have established techniques that help one get closer to subjects while capturing both the emic and etic perspectives. Peshkin (1986) demonstrated the emic and etic points of view when he lived with a Fundamentalist Christian School for eighteen months. As a Jew, who studied a Fundamentalist Christian school, he explains later that he was able to provide the emic voice by taming his subjectivity (Peshkin, 1988), not eliminating it. As such, while one's reaction or reflection, personal narrative, or travel account was typically done after a formal ethnography had been written, the personal narrative soon gained traction for what it evoked about the process and the person who did the work. According to Pratt (1986), while ethnography is quite boring to read, the aspect of personal writing that accompanies it is what makes it interesting to read and understand the process undertaken to obtain knowledge about others:

> Personal narrative mediated this contradiction between the engagement called for in fieldwork and the self-effacement called for in formal ethnographic description, or at least mitigates some of its anguish, by inserting into the ethnographic text the authority of the personal experience out of which the ethnography is made. It thus recuperates at least a few shreds of what was exercised in the conversation from the face-to-face field encounter to objectified

> science. That is why such narratives have not been killed by science, and why they are worth looking at, especially to people interested in countering the tendency towards alienation and dehumanization in much conventional ethnographic description. (p. 33)

While it is not necessary to appear as a castaway in a different location to carry out research or take on the dangerous role of trying to survive among participants while doing ethnographic work, the task of the contemporary qualitative researcher who uses ethnographic techniques is to get close to the participants in order to get the most information. While one should not abandon the knowledge that classical anthropology has contributed about other-cultures, Messerschmidt (1981) suggests that indigenous anthropology or the study of one's native country, society, and/or ethnic group helps one to understand familiar places and familiar individuals.

The need for research at home has gained traction and is conceptualized in many different ways: native anthropology (Jones, 1971); peer-group research (Cassell, 1977); insider anthropology (Aguilar, 1981); auto-ethnography (Hayano, 1979); critical ethnography (Collins, 1990). As such, ethnographic research done in one's own context is a necessity for anthropology, for it helps to strengthen cross-cultural perspectives (Wolcott, 1981).

Such was the case with Sherif (2001) and St. Pierre (2008) who each went home to do research, but quickly learned they were the *others*, not the locals. While doing research at home, they quickly found that their mere presence in the field simultaneously afforded them the serendipity to research themselves and who they are as insiders versus outsiders of the community. Despite their initial desire to fit in and preconceived expectation of getting the answers to their research questions without a problem each one realized that an insider/outsider role is not so much a black and white binary. Rather, access to and rapport with individuals in the society under study rests on the ability for one to understand that all research relationships are layered and ambiguous. The space between the self and the other is further complicated or blurred by one's identity or the intersections of differences one exhibits and cannot check-in (i.e., race, class, gender) when doing ethnographic research or borrowing ethnographic techniques. For example, Karim (1993) and Ganesh (1993), two female non-western anthropologists studying cultures in their countries different from their own, found that because the *nativised self* and the *native* have no line of demarcation, it was easier for them to see how their role as female anthropologist served as a potential to exploit the endangered through the production of publications about their work. Back (1993) and Amadiume (1993), anthropologists studying their communities of origin, developed a self-consciousness that helped them realize their own marginalized gendered work as anthropologists while trying to enhance the role of disenfranchised men and women. As a result, they each gave up trying to hold on to the context they once knew from the past and accepted the current way of life there for other members of the community even if they did not agree with the social norms.

A researcher doing anthropologic work ought to be open to this personal dynamic to get at the person-centered data and then be able to represent it in light of their own ways of knowing, especially since doing research on others is guided by solidarity, community, and hospitality (Glesne, 2011). However, this has presented a challenge for even those ethnographers who do anthropologic work among their own people in familiar contexts. Some dilemmas that rise during this process includes how to best negotiate one's identity in the face marginalization (Sherif, 2001), how to muddy personal and professional relationships, how to navigate between organizational rules and procedures absent of ethics that collide with one's own moral compass (Wolcott, 2002), or how to conduct research where one has a personal stake in its completion (Laura, 2010).

Denzin and Lincoln (1994) describe this tension in qualitative research as the sixth moment, which is characterized by texts that are messy, subjective, open ended, conflictual, and feminist influenced (p. 559). According to Coffey (1999):

> Research method texts remain relatively silent on the ways in which fieldwork affects us and, and we the field. It is perhaps more common than it once was for researchers to reflect upon their own fieldwork experiences. Indeed, it is usual to find a personal dimension in the retelling of fieldwork and the analysis of the data. However, such reflection remains at the margins of ethnographic scholarship. While there is an increasing awareness of the personal nature of fieldwork, the self in the field is not something to which methods texts give substantial attention. Issues of identity, selfhood and emotionality are often referred to, and thereby understood, in tangential and semi-detached ways. (p. 1)

The Study

Setting

In 2010, I went back home to the place where I had been raised, the Mexico-US border. Anzaldúa (1987), a native of south Texas, described this area as one that made her feel like the Other because of her difference in gender and sexual orientation: "Here, the queer are the mirror reflecting the heterosexual tribe's fear" (p. 40). Another Mexican-American academician who also wrote about his experience in academe along the Mexico-U.S. border described the area as "conservative and rural" (García, 2005, p. 18). Yet, despite the norms of this particular setting, Ms. Smith believed she worked towards creating an inclusive environment for students whose identities were contested. In addition to her own self-proclaimed status as a social justice educator, I personally witnessed her rapport with students and distinction as a faculty member. Her work and reputation within a context that was known for its discriminatory practices and attitudes, gave me a hunch that researching her pedagogy was warranted. I felt her story and teaching method could be used as an additional heuristic for educators who wanted to improve practice. Incidentally, I used teacher leadership (Yendol-Silva, Gimbert, & Nolan, 2000) to conceptualize her work. My research questions were as follows: What does an inclusive classroom look like in regard to the teacher and student interactions; How does one teacher create inclusive environments; How does the teacher understand intersections of differences; What conditions enable/or hinder the teacher to create inclusive spaces; What strategies does the teacher employ in creating inclusive spaces; In what ways is the classroom not inclusive; Is creating inclusive spaces even possible?

Methods

Participant selection. Instead of seeking a distance between researcher and participant, I wanted to be as close to the participant as possible. Patton (2002) wrote that as a researcher one ought to "be open to new possibilities, the bricolage of combing old things in new ways, including alternative and emergent forms of data collection, transformed observer-observed relations, and reframed interviewer-interviewee interconnection" (p. 402). Also, I embodied the role of an apprentice who wanted to learn from another person about their craft. While situations or the nature of field work will dictate how one originally presents himself/herself, Agar (1996) writes, "As time goes on, [one] will be accepted, at least by some of the group,

and [one] will feel an exhilaration as people decide [one] really [is] interested in learning how they think and what they do" (pp. 61-62).

Aside from using specific criteria to select a participant, I felt that if I worked with a friend, the entree and rapport already established with a teacher, would strengthen my chances of gathering the most data in the shortest amount to time. Ignorant of the epistemological ruptures that I will address next, I originally blamed the participant for fieldwork dilemmas along the way. I thought whichever friend I selected would surely comply with my every request for an interview and observation request as well as my request to review personal documents. I also thought I would be better off conducting research with a friend and be in a better position to understand and represent the findings of my research without hesitation.

I invited Ms. Smith, a veteran teacher, who I respected and admired, to participate in my research study about a teacher who makes the classroom more inclusive for students who identify with identities different from the norm (i.e., immigrant status, gender expression, religion/other belief system).

Fieldwork techniques. Over the course of the four-month study, I interviewed the participant three times by adhering to Seidman's interview protocol (2006). While I had some pre-established questions, I also was cognizant of capturing the bigger picture by "simply hanging out" as a fieldwork technique (Adler & Adler, 1987). I observed her dynamic with students and staff. While I did not intend to do a full ethnographic study, I aimed at barrowing ethnographic techniques to arrive at a better understanding about the work of one teacher. I had the desire to apply the skills I was taught about data collection and to get feedback from my committee methodologist, Duncan Waite (1994, 2004, 2011, 2012, 2014), who was mentored and trained by Harry F. Wolcott (2009) and Robert Charles Proudfoot (1984). Going into the field, I felt prepared to collect all the data I needed to answer my questions.

Throughout the course of the study, I also reviewed artifacts such as photos, letters from students and parents to the participant, and the participant's professional portfolio. I also found artifacts that were already available, such as those that are public (items posted in classroom, news reports and world wide web documents). According to Glesne (2011), artifacts are the material objects that represent the culture of the person and the setting being studied. While these artifacts are mundane to the participant, Glesne suggests that artifacts can be read for stories that surround them.

Murchison (2010) contends that because "ethnographic data is fleeting" (p. 70), the researcher ought to record data in a systemic way before it disappears and dissipates. As such, to organize my work and make sense of the data, I kept an electronic ethnographic record (Murchison, 2010) in a form of a word document of each day I was conducting fieldwork. This record helped me recall the events, the emotions, and the conversations important to answering my research questions. Through the record, I reflected about the progress, the direction, and the concerns I had about the study. In the ethnographic record, I wrote descriptive notes that were not judgmental, but rather based on my perception about the setting and the participant(s). In one section, I kept a log of events and thoughts about next steps to take, and I clarified my own thoughts and problems, wrote down feelings, and elaborated descriptions. This also served as a space to organize emails and notes for myself.

Data analysis began as soon as I entered the field in order to begin making sense of Ms. Smith's practice. This helped me guide my interviews sessions, observations, and data collection. As such, I was cognizant of early and potential patterns that I might find from the data while I conducted field work. For example, while transcribing my interviews, I developed insights and hunches about what was going on, so I noted these insights off to the margin. These notes served as the beginning of my rudimentary analysis. According to Patton (2002), recording and tracking serendipitous insights during data collection is part of field work and the beginning of qualitative analysis. Pre-coding helped me stay on track and would have

helped me modify my approach in the event I needed to do so. I eventually went through two additional cycles of coding. Finally, I presented my findings in the form of themes. I found an overarching theme supported by three subthemes. The overarching theme suggested that the participant only moved towards an inclusive environment rather than fully arrive at it despite her efforts and knowledge of diversity and inclusivity. Ms. Smith helped to convey the notion that social justice is not possible given one's own untamed biases. Implications for practice, policy, and further research were provided to help one understand that one is always swimming in between the fluidity of identity and binary logic.

As important as these findings and implications are so is what I had left out about the process to get at the data. Until now, I better understand what really happened because of the following flashback. However, I conceptualize the field dilemmas more as epistemological ruptures that have taught me a lesson about the relationship between the researcher and the researched.

Flashback

Researcher's Privilege

One of the ways doing research with a friend proved to be a challenge for me was because I perceived Ms. Smith did not always cooperate. In an effort to collect diverse sources of data, I asked Ms. Smith to write her thoughts about practice in a journal a few times a week so I could have access to multiple data points. I originally figured that this would not be a problem because I thought it was an easy task for the participant to complete. While Ms. Smith believed it was a good idea, too, she later confessed that she had too much work to do and that she probably would not be able to keep a journal as originally planned. I insisted she try and provided her some time to acclimate to the task. I often prompted her to include her thoughts in the journal and reminded her that I was looking forward to reading the journal. Incidentally, I always ended our interviews by telling her that she should capture her own experiences for her own benefit, too. After all, how else does one see their own strengths or weaknesses if not through critical reflection? I tried to strengthen my goal of persuasion by showing her a book akin to *Chicken Soup for the Teacher's Soul* to show her how others have done reflection. To my dismay, Ms. Smith did not keep a journal. As I result, I became irritated. I believed I had lost time and potentially rich information about her thoughts regarding her work. I did not answer my phone for the next few days if Ms. Smith called me to gossip as friends do or answer any of her emails to catch up. At the time, I was right, and she was wrong. I did not see how retaliating could have jeopardized my relationship with her and jeopardized the aim of my study.

Rather than give up completely on the journal as a source of data, I still continued to try my best throughout the study to encourage Ms. Smith to document her reflections and thoughts in a journal, so I could include them in the write up of a case study. One day, as I was conducting observations, I saw Ms. Smith's desk full of papers to grade. I heard the bell ring, the questions from students, and the interruptions of knocks at the door. It was then that I felt foolish because I remembered the demands of teaching in an era of high stakes testing and accountability (Waite, Boone, & McGhee, 2001). I realized that I could not be angry with my friend. Instead, I was disappointed at myself for automatically expecting Ms. Smith, my friend, to comply with my demands. Being in the classroom again and seeing the emotional, physical, and cognitive demands of teaching high school students served as an epistemological rupture. It had been four years since I had left the classroom room to pursue a doctorate degree full-time.

In essence, a challenge for me throughout the study was accepting this dynamic not as an uncooperative friend or dilemma, but rather data that tells me more about this educator's work. In addition, her inability to perform the task of keeping a journal helped me see that my way of knowing was one-sided since I could not see that my friend was already helping me by giving up some time after work and during work to talk to me. By reflecting upon my privilege (male, Ph.D. student with K-12 Administrator Licensure) against the backdrop of the study and against the life of the participant, I finally saw how I was subconsciously perceiving that Ms. Smith was uncooperative. Like Peshkin (1988), I, too, wanted to remedy what I saw as poor teaching simply because I had not tamed all my subjectivities. However, I diminished the power dynamic between us and accepted that my friend could not maintain a journal because she was simply too tired or because she was preoccupied with helping the children understand subject matter. I did this by embodying the role of a learner who genuinely wanted to understand the person, the pedagogy, and the context. Her work was at once useful in that it answered my research questions and it served as an additional heuristic for me as an educator.

This process was not easy, and it did not happen overnight. For example, on many occasions Ms. Smith and I arranged to meet for interviews and observations. When I arrived to meet with Ms. Smith I often found myself waiting for long periods of time because she was not ready to sit and talk with me or because she simply forgot. Again, I was disturbed by this, but I valued my friendship with Ms. Smith and wanted to do the research on her, on her practice, and on her classroom. I learned to be patient, and I saw the value of taking on an inductive approach versus a deductive approach, including the value of serendipity. After a few times waiting for Ms. Smith to appear, I had already conducted some interesting observations simply by being present, or as my methodologist called it, being a fly on the wall.

Due to the nature of dissertation deadlines and committee expectations, I subconsciously wanted to complete the study as soon as possible. Yet, overtime, I developed more skills and the motivation to accept Ms. Smith as the expert, which helped me understand that I did not know all about teaching and learning and that my experience as a teacher years ago was one of many. Duncan Waite, my methodologist, saw my anxiety and reminded me of what Pablo Picasso said, too, to illustrate how I should be open to the unknown: "If you know what you are going to do, what is the good in doing it." Above all, I learned that I could suspend my privilege and tame my power when I took off the mask of research for the mask of friend (Goffman, 1959). By also conducting a dramaturgical analysis of my role in the process of getting the answers to my research questions, I psychologically became unwired and was much better able to slip in and out of my innate privilege as a male researcher at home. By doing so, the concept of teaching high school and the idea of Ms. Smith as a former colleague and mentor became unfamiliar to me. Thus, I became a humble apprentice who moved around the goal of detached involvement (Agar, 1996).

Vulnerability to Place and to People

Ms. Smith loved to drink a glass of wine with dinner. When we met over dinner for an interview that was usually the case, too. Again, she was busy, and I had to acclimate to her schedule if I was to understand the roles she played or masks she wore and interpret how she made her classroom more inclusive for students who identified with differences in identity. Often, she could only meet after work or on weekends. Some meetings were off the record where we did not discuss research. Instead, we had a cup of coffee or visited with mutual friends. Other times, we had lunch to review some follow up questions, or I helped her decorate her classroom as a way to thank her for her time. There was no doubt that I spent equal amounts of time with Ms. Smith for the purpose of the research and to preserve our friendship. Yet, there were also times when I accompanied her to places I felt were dangerous for us. Still, my

presence in these places eventually did help to get at the data I was after. On many occasions, Ms. Smith decided to mix business and pleasure. For example, after picking her up for an interview over dinner one day from her classroom, Ms. Smith asked if we could quickly take a trip across the US-Mexico border for a medical prescription she had pending at a Mexican pharmacy. It is not unusual for many goods and services to be in demand across the border town where home is located because of the lower prices in Mexico; However, in 2007 the level of drug cartel violence in this area began to reach new heights. Those who travelled to/from Mexico from home were warned by local authorities. Yet, in the name of helping my friend and eliciting information for the purpose of the research, I accompanied her across the border and upon our return from Mexico conducted a formal interview over dinner. During the one-hour round trip in the car, I asked many questions and made more observations to then tell about the person Ms. Smith was in addition to the educator she was. While I was scared and nervous about the process of getting the information I needed, Humphreys' (1970) methodological process came to mind. As such, I found myself doing something I would have found much more difficulty without some form of active participation. In essence, I was in a much better position to engage my participant in meaningful discussion about her activity in a high-risk situation like that of Humphrey's watchqueen experience.

Rather than tell of what her educator role should be based on community expectations and state law, shadowing her at any opportunity (risky or not) was important to arrive at an understanding of her multiple masks and roles. Similarly, Wolcott (1973) shadowed a principal for a year and found a discrepancy between the actions and beliefs of the man, Ed Bell, and the role of principal expected of him to play. Thus, I had experienced another epistemological rupture when I learned that the production of knowledge in the form of qualitative representation rests on the reliability and trustworthiness of one to tell and give thick description (Geertz, 1973). The age-old dictum comes to mind: You are there because I was there. Such was the case when Geertz (1973) was welcomed into the village after he, too, fled the scene of a cockfight when doing field work in Indonesia. The villagers, who now saw Geertz as an extension of their people because he also ran from the police during a raid of an illegal cockfight, welcomed him. He was able to conduct interviews and observations with much more ease than as an outsider and contributed much of what we now know of symbolic anthropology.

In addition to being present in the field, Geertz was just as vulnerable as the citizens of the town to be arrested for participating in the cockfights; therefore, his story presented a lesson I looked to for direction: He wouldn't have been able to provide a thick description of the Balinese culture if she hadn't become vulnerable. To get the most information rich story, a researcher must be willing to make themselves vulnerable to the research process, including participation. While this may subject one to the context and ramifications associated with it, I reminded myself that the violence is not only in Mexico. It is also present on the U.S. side. Rather than inform my methodological decisions with what I already knew about travel to/from Mexico, I became vulnerable, too, and looked to another way of knowing: being there.

An Unexpected Representation

While a researcher's personality, role, and skill have implications on the research process, one's level of vulnerability, one's honesty, and one's insider perspective also affects the write up of findings. Another challenge for me throughout the study was that I felt subconsciously obligated to be nice at the expense of telling what *really* happened. I suppose I did this because I did not want to judge Ms. Smith's work or misinterpret her life. As a result of this subconscious desire to remain loyal to my friend by not representing Ms. Smith in the worst light, I found myself ignoring the not so pleasant details of what I originally recorded in

my interviews and observation notes. It was not until I attempted to write up my case that I realized my case study did not reflect an accurate representation of my participant. As a result, I could not answer my research question based on the data I had reported. With the help of my dissertation Chair, Sarah Nelson, I realized this happened because I was only using the most ideal data to answer my research questions. I realized I needed to not only discuss the details that described Ms. Smith in the best light, but more importantly, also discuss the details that described Ms. Smith as an imperfect human being. To do so, I transcribed my interviews again and retyped my notes. It was then that I observed I had subconsciously left out many notes and valuable quotes simply because I did not want to portray my participant as a villain. I was, again, subconsciously bias and trying to protect the image of one teacher in my work. While this cost me more time and effort, I soon realized thereafter that going back and retracing my steps was time well spent because my write up should not be about be about conveying only the nice part of the study. It should be about conveying whatever is going to help us understand the complexity of helping students feel included. As such, the challenge for me was accepting the necessity to provide a critique, not a judgment, of Ms. Smith's work and description of her life. By writing up the story of Ms. Smith, I experienced another epistemological rupture.

While I did look at one teacher doing good work and who exhibited a social justice orientation, the unexpected representation I wrote up conceptualized the teacher's identity and problematized the teacher's work. By doing so, I argued that missing in school improvement literature is the literature that problematizes the good/bad dichotomous understanding of teachers and the work they do in schools. As such, the work of Ms. Smith in my study was characterized as a work in progress, or work that was moving towards an inclusive environment, rather than judging her work as a fixed point. Unlike a traditional narrative of "noncontradictory truth" (Cary, 1999), the findings of my study resembled an "uncooperative text" (Lather & Smithies, 1997) because my text did not represent my participant and her work in an idealized way, nor did I retouch the less than perfect elements of the participant's life and work to represent absolute truth. Instead, I represented the narrative of Ms. Smith's work as a messy, realistic, disturbing, unexpected, and nuanced account. I did this purposefully to provide a more complex description of her and her work in order to write a narrative that did not contribute to the discourse of teacher's work as good/bad, effective/ineffective, or any other dichotomous evaluation. I chose to represent that participant's work in way that demonstrates even the best teacher's work is at once both effective and ineffective because learning environments are not stagnant spaces with monolithic students. I represented the participant with various roles or masks (social justice educator, good teacher, wife, friend, leader) who, although well intentioned, was human and not perfect; therefore, not only did I *not* write a victory narrative or tale of triumph over adversity, but I embraced the task of the bricoleur and recognized the "complexity and heterogeneity of all human experience" (Kincheloe, 2001, p. 681). As such, this story in its entirety is an epistemological rupture for what it helped me unlearn about achieving social justice.

Discussion

As a current professor of educational leadership within a university principal preparation program, one of the tasks I do is introduce the role of anthropology in education so that students can better understand their role as researchers and leaders in public schools. By studying action research (Stringer, 2014), students learn how to facilitate the identification of an issue and carry out data collection processes, which are similar to those techniques used by ethnographers in education (Fulginiti, 1986; Wolcott, 1972).

To carry out data collection processes successfully in public schools as a principal, I encourage my students who are principals-in-training that the role of facilitator and of listener

are much easier when one embodies the task of an apprentice. The irony is that as a leader and boss of the organization, one can interpret the role of the apprentice in the pejorative sense. However, I invite students to become a learner so that their stakeholders (parents, teachers, staff, district leaders, community members) can respond to their interest in using local knowledge for the benefit of school improvement. Rather than adopt prescriptive models of improvement that may or may not work, principals who enact the role of an apprentice first can then facilitate the identification of a problem and identification of a solution. Thus, they will be in a better position to increase student achievement as they define it. While the principal is a role where one operates from the point of authority, enacting the role of apprentice is one that can help principals learn from a point of humility.

To convey this idea further, I remind my students about the headaches I experienced with Ms. Smith during the course of my study when she did not produce a journal. By operating from a point of authority and privilege I got nowhere. I then connect my fieldwork experience to my own experience as a former public school principal by telling students that others will be more apt to follow one when one show humility and shows an interest in learning. Otherwise, the role of a principal can become implicated with headaches and one can subconsciously jeopardize relationships and improvement efforts.

Another task I charge principals-in-training with is to become vulnerable to others for the sake of building relationships and collaborating for school improvement. Again, I use my experience during fieldwork to show my students how not becoming vulnerable almost cost me rich data for my study. When I was too proud to let loose or too rigid to divert from the research plan, I became anxious and frustrated with myself. As a result, I doubted my abilities as researcher. To avoid those emotions, I invite students to also practice vulnerability so that when they become principals they will be able to quickly establish rapport with faculty, with students, and with parents.

Because vulnerability is not something many are comfortable with doing immediately, I ask students to read part of my own auto-ethnography so that I can model the vulnerability I expect them to show. Students generally find my ability to share my inner most thoughts, including identity, admirable. As such, I connect that to their work as future principals and ask if they would want their stake-holders to agree with the work they do or approve of the actions they do. Most agree.

I remind students that even though Ms. Smith was my friend, she and I had to spend some time becoming vulnerable to one another by sharing private information and discussing controversial topics. Only then were we ready to explore her practice. To further convey my idea, I suggest that becoming vulnerable does not have to always be with friends, for Rainbow (1977) became vulnerable to a complete stranger who refused to be his informant. It was only until after the act of vulnerability did he and the gentleman become friends. This same dynamic can be understood in the context of working with stakeholders within public schools as a principal.

Looking back upon this fieldwork experience has also informed my understanding of ethics in fieldwork and informed how I help principals-in-training understand their responsibility as ethical leaders. While I aimed to provide another way of knowing with Ms. Smith's story, I could not do that if I did not tell what *really* happened in Ms. Smith's classroom and describe her biases towards particular students. As a case and point, Lather (1994) maintained that a vast amount of educational research tended to represent a story of triumph over adversity. This formulaic write up, also known as a victory narrative, while well intentioned, perpetuates academic elitism and advances a positivistic epistemology (Cary, 1999, 2006; Kincheloe, 2001).

Mostly drawing from research in the field of education, I borrowed different lenses and methods to tease out the complexity of one teacher's work so that I rendered another way of

knowing, an unexpected representation. Therefore, my final representation of what really happened troubles the normative school improvement literature that suggests school reform is as simple as applying a standard formula or reduced to best practices. Some examples include Bolman and Deal (2002), Conners (2000), or Payne (1998).

To help my students understand that school improvement involves more than a packaged model, took kit, check list, or best practice, I invite them to read the story of Ms. Smith, too. I then ask if they are up for the challenge of leading schools with diverse demographics while controlling their own biases. With the goal of showing them an additional heuristic for school improvement, I also aim to focus on complexity and paradox as an understanding for moving schools forward. While my text allows my students the opportunity to see the uncensored and realness of equity work and the complexity of identity I do not leave their development to chance. Instead, I cultivate their skills as researchers and as practitioners so that they too can provide a narrative of their own during the principalship as form of reflection that will help them avoid that which Ms. Smith did not originally know.

Conclusion

In this article, I argued that doing fieldwork at home with someone familiar is not free from fieldwork dilemmas. However, many of the dilemmas I encountered were a result of simply not understanding the personal nature of fieldwork and appreciating the dynamic between researcher and the participant. After reflecting back on a research project I did in 2010 and learning that the researcher's emotions are part of the inquiry, not separate from it I come to appreciate the lessons I learned, especially because they inform my work as a professor of educational leadership. I conceptualize these lessons as epistemological ruptures.

Furthermore, I found that using a flashback to articulate what *really* happened has given me the opportunity to look forward and introduce the role of anthropology in education within the principal preparation program. By using my experience in the field doing qualitative inquiry, I help students understand that they, as school principals, will need to enact the role of apprentice, enact vulnerability, and eventually represent their own tale in a responsible and ethical way. While these are not the only skills they will need, they are the foundation for then accomplishing a greater task like facilitating research for school improvement.

References

Adler, P. A., & Adler, P. (1987). *Membership roles in field research*. Newbury Park, CA: Sage.

Agar, M. H. (1996). *The professional stranger: An informal introduction to ethnography* (2nd ed.). Bingley, UK: Emerald.

Anzaldúa, G. (1987) *Borderlands*. San Francisco, CA: Aunt Lute Books.

Amadiume, I. (1993). The mouth that spoke a falsehood will later speak the truth: Going home to the field in Eastern Nigeria. In D. P. C. Bell & W. J. Karim (Eds.), *Gendered fields: Women, men, and ethnography* (pp. 248-251). London, UK: Routledge.

Aguilar, J. L. (1981). Insider research: An ethnography of debate. In D. A. Messerschmidt (Ed.), *Anthropologists at home in North America: Methods and issues in the study of one's own society* (pp. 15-26). New York, NY: Cambridge University Press.

Back, L. (1993). Gendered participation: Masculinity and fieldwork in a South London adolescent community. In D. P. C. Bell & W. J. Karim (Eds.), *Gendered fields: Women, men, and ethnography* (pp. 215-233). London, UK: Routledge.

Bolman, L. G., & Deal, T. E. (2002). *Reframing the path to school leadership: A guide for teachers and principals.* Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

Cary, L. J. (2006). *Curriculum spaces: Discourse, postmodern theory and educational*

research. New York, NY: Peter Lang.
Cary, L. J. (1999). Unexpected stories: Life history and the limits of representation. *Qualitative Inquiry, 5*(3), 411-427. doi: 10.1177/107780049900500307
Cassell, J. (1977). The relationship of observer to observed in peer-group research. *Human Organizations, 36*, 412-416.
Coffey, A. (1999). *The ethnographic self: Fieldwork and the representation of identity.* London, UK: Sage.
Collins, P. (1990). *Black feminist thought: Knowledge, consciousness, and the politics of empowerment.* New York, NY: Routledge.
Conners, N. A. (2000). *If you don't feed the teacher, they eat the students: Guide to success for administrators and teachers*. Nashville, TN: Incentive Publications.
Denzin, N. K., & Lincoln, Y. S. (Eds.). (1994). *Handbook of qualitative research.* Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
Fulginiti, J. M. (1986). Ethnography in school administration. *Practicing Anthropology, 8*(3/4), 20-21.
García, J. H. (2005, April). *Chicano and queer in the academy: An autoethnography on the pursuit of tenure* [Presentation]. Paper presented at the annual meeting of the American Educational Research Association, Montreal, Canada.
Ganesh, K. (1993). Breaching the wall of difference: Fieldwork and a personal journey to Srivaikuntam, Tamilnadu. In D. P. C. Bell & W. J. Karim (Eds.), *Gendered fields: Women, men, and ethnography* (pp. 128-142). London, UK: Routledge.
Geertz, C. (1973). *The interpretation of cultures*. New York, NY: Basic Books.
Glesne, C. (2011). *Becoming qualitative researchers: An introduction.* Boston, MA: Pearson.
Goffman, E. (1959). *The presentation of self in everyday life.* Garden City, NY: Doubleday Anchor Books.
Hayano, D. M. (1979). Auto-ethnography. Paradigms, problems, and prospects. *Human Organizations, 38*, 99-104.
Jones, D. J. (1971). Social responsibility and the belief in basic research: An example from Thailand. *Current Anthropology, 12*, 347-350.
Karim, W. (1993). Epilogue: The "nativised" self and the "native." In D. P. C. Bell & W. J. Karim (Eds.), *Gendered fields: Women, men, and ethnography* (pp. 248-251). London, UK: Routledge.
Kincheloe, J. L. (2001). Describing the bricolage: Conceptualizing a new rigor in qualitative research. *Qualitative Inquiry*, *7*(6), 679-692. doi: 10.1177/107780040100700601
Lather, P. (1994). Critical inquiry in qualitative research: Feminist and poststructural perspectives: Science after "truth." In B. Crabtree, W. L. Miller, R. B. Addison, V. Gilchrist, & A. J. Kuzel (Eds.), *Exploring collaborative research in primary care* (pp. 103-114). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
Lather, P., & Smithies, C. (1997). *Troubling the angels: Women living with HIV/AIDS.* Boulder, CO: Westview/Harper Collins.
Laura, C. T. (2010). Home/work: Engaging the methodological dilemmas and possibilities of intimate inquiry. *Race, Ethnicity & Education*, *13*(3), 277-293.
Humphreys, L. (1970). *Tearoom trade: A study of homosexual encounters in public places*. Chicago, IL: Aldine.
Malinowski, B. (1967). *A diary in the strict sense of the term.* Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press.
Malinowski, V. (1967). Preface. In B. Malinowski (Ed.), *A diary in the strict sense of the term* (pp. vii-ix). Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press.
Messerschmidt, D. A. (1981). On indigenous anthropology: Some observations. *Current Anthropology*, *22*(2), 197-198.

Murchison, J. M. (2010). *Ethnography essentials.* San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.
Patton, M. Q. (2002). *Qualitative research and evaluation methods.* Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
Payne, R. (1998). *A framework for understanding poverty*. Baytown, TX: RFT Publishing.
Peshkin, A. (1988). In search of subjectivity. One's own. *Educational Researcher, 17*(7), 17-21.
Peshkin, A. (1986). *God's choice: The total world of a fundamentalist Christian school.* Chicago, IL: The University of Chicago Press.
Pratt, M. L. (1986). Fieldwork in common places. In J. Clifford & G. E. Marcus (Eds.), *Writing culture: The poetics and politics of ethnography* (pp. 27-50). Berkley, CA: University of California Press.
Proudfoot, R. C. (1984). *Urban ethnography: An exploration and interpretation of post-camp period of Laotian refugees settling in Eugene-Springfield, Oregon* (Doctoral dissertation). Retrieved from Open Access. (2013-07-30 21:21:03)
Rainbow, P. (1977). *Reflections of fieldwork in Morocco*. Berkley, CA: University of California Press.
Rosaldo, R. (1989). *Culture and truth: The remaking of social analysis.* Boston, MA: Beacon.
Sherif, B. (2001). The ambiguity of boundaries in the fieldwork experience: Establishing rapport and negotiating insider/outsider status. *Qualitative Inquiry*, *7*(4), 436-447.
Seidman, I. (2006). *Interviewing as qualitative research: A guide for researchers in education and the social sciences.* New York, NY: Teachers College Press.
Stringer, E. T. (2014). *Action research.* Los Angeles, CA: Sage.
St. Pierre, E. A. (2008). Home as a site of theory. *International Review of Qualitative Research, 1*(2), 119-124.
Waite, D. (1994). *Ethnography's demise: What's next for narrative?* [Presentation]. Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the American Educational Research Association, New Orleans, LA.
Waite, D. (2004, April). *Canons to the left of us, canons to the right of us: On the over-determination of method in qualitative research* [Presentation]. Paper presented to the Annual Meeting of the American Educational Research Association, San Diego, CA.
Waite, D. (2011). A simple card trick: Teaching qualitative data analysis using a deck of playing cards. *Qualitative Inquiry, 17*(10), 982-985.
Waite, D. (2012). *Policing methodologies* [Presentation]. Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of The International Congress of Qualitative Inquiry, Urbana, IL.
Waite, D. (2014). Teaching the unteachable: Some issues of qualitative research pedagogy. *Qualitative Inquiry, 20*(3), 267-281.
Waite, D., Boone, M., & McGhee, M. (2001). A critical sociocultural view of accountability. *Journal of School Leadership, 11*, 182-203.
Wolcott, H. F. (1972). The teacher as an enemy. [Abridged]. *Practical Anthropology, 19*(5), 226-230.
Wolcott, H. F. (1973) *The man in the principal's office*. Walnut Creek, CA: AltaMira Press.
Wolcott, H. F. (1981). Home and away: Personal contrasts in ethnographic style. In D. A. Messerschmidt (Ed.), *Anthropologists at home in North America: Methods and issues in the study of one's own society* (pp. 255-265). New York, NY: Cambridge University Press.
Wolcott, H. F. (2002). *Sneaky kid and its aftermath: Ethics and intimacy in fieldwork*. Walnut Creek, CA: AltaMira Press.
Wolcott, H. F. (2009). *Writing up qualitative research* (3rd ed.). Walnut Hills, CA: Sage.
Yendol-Silva, D., Gimbert, B., & Nolan, J. (2000). Sliding the doors: Locking and unlocking possibilities for teacher leadership. *Teachers College Record, 102*(4), 779-804. doi: 10.1111/0161-4681.00077

Author Note

Israel Aguilar, Ph.D. is an assistant professor of educational administration at Texas A&M University-Corpus Christi. Correspondence regarding this article can be addressed directly to: Israelaguilar01@hotmail.com.

Article Citation

Aguilar, I. (2018). Epistemological ruptures: Flashback on fieldwork dilemmas while doing research on friends at home. *The Qualitative Report, 23*(3), 505-518. Retrieved from http://nsuworks.nova.edu/tqr/vol23/iss3/1